The sensitive city. Exploration through the urban sensory

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the city through urban sensory is a relevant subject for contemporary research regarding the complexities of the built environment. Over time, theorists and practitioners having different educational backgrounds have questioned how urban space and social structures are interrelated and how to address the issues they raised perspective to determine the proper problem-solving methods.

The main focus of this paper is on analysing literature related to human and urban perception and comparing the 19th and 20th century ideas that have a great influence on how cities are documented today. In order to do that, a multidimensional approach has been used: for the theoretical dimension of the city, George Simmel and Emile Durkheim are relevant whereas the literary dimension of it is well illustrated by Benjamin Walter and Henri Lefebvre. The cognitive and social dimensions of the city are eloquently portrayed by Juhani Pallasmaa, Kevin Lynch or Jane Jacobs. Although the physical features of a city are important for how people perceive their surroundings, this paper examines in what way both visual comprehension and social interactions define spatial perception by creating a sense of place.

To select the most relevant concepts and approaches to urban sensory, personal observations, literature survey and qualitative research have been used. To determine the relationships and connections between the built environment and its inhabitants, further studies will be pursued through the process of planning and developing a research proposal for the dissertation. The topic discussed in this paper is relevant as it concludes with the idea that cities mirror social realities while humans are struggling to adapt to the fast-changing environment.

Keywords: social adaptation, urban perception, human senses, spatial cognition, spatial abstractions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, cities face various difficult challenges as they are growing more powerful and attract a great number of inhabitants every day. In the context of political, economic, social and environmental crisis, many cities find themselves in a position where they can no longer meet people's needs and desires.

In order to understand the overall picture of how cities were approached throughout history, ideas from different fields of study – urban geography, urban planning, literature, psychology – were debated. Emile Durkheim and George Simmel analyse the inability of people to maintain healthy social connections while trying to adapt to a new urban environment of the industrialised world. A further study focuses on the image of the city in literature and poetry, through the image of Benjamin Walter's flaneur but also the requirements of capitalism, explained by Henri Lefebvre. In terms of sensory perception, Juhani Pallasmaa and Kevin Lynch offer two different perspectives on how people interact with the built environment. To conclude, Jane Jacobs and her criticism of the modernist's radical break with people-oriented cities.

This paper aims to analyse the way people perform and interact within urban structures and not to describe the direct connection between the human body and the built environment.

Therefore, a comparative research method has been used to identify theories that had a major contribution to redefine human vulnerabilities induced by the urban environment.

As cities are the product of social interactions, it is of great importance that the relationship between the urban space and its users to grow in a beneficial way for both sides.

This paper represents the preamble to a subsequent master's degree dissertation.

II. A THEORETICAL DIMENSION OF THE CITY

Humans have five basic senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The information gathered from the environment is collected through the five sensing organs and then sent to the brain for interpretation. Brain processes and previous individual experiences are of great importance to the way people perceive, understand and act in the urban environment. Hence, the psychological experiences of the city and the aspects of the urban space that are revealed by it are the focus of this chapter.

The industrial revolution was a turning point in the way cities and urban societies evolved or decayed. Cities grew fast and chaotic as many people decided to leave the countryside and move to the city. This massive rural-urban migration had major impacts on social relationships. For Emile Durkheim (1893), one of the founding fathers of sociology, people that traded rural life for cities, abandoned "a form of mechanical solidarity, with social bonds based on common beliefs, rituals, routines and symbols and welcomed an organic solidarity, with social bonds becoming based on specialisation and interdependence"[1]. Durkheim also suggested that the survival of urban societies depended, and still depend, on the "organic solidarity" [1], as people rely on one another to perform specific tasks.

The "division of labor and coexistence of social difference" [1] were the most important and convincing features of the new urban environment that persuaded people to move in. Cities were spaces of liberty and autonomy, promoting "individualism, free-thinking and civility" [1]. At the same time, one's identity was not recognised anymore as it would have been in the rural communities described above. Thus, the lack of identity and the anonymity offered by the city was seen to have "profoundly ambivalent consequences" [1] for urban inhabitants. In order to survive and prosper in the fast-growing cities, urban dwellers needed to adapt to a rich sensory imagery, a great number of stimulus and a rhythm of life that was very different from the one of the countryside. Therefore, maintaining relationships was seen as a challenging task in the context of noise, visual pollution, and sensory bombardment [1].

As a consequence, cities' inhabitants started to develop an attitude of indifference, described by George Simmel in the 1950s, as a "blasé attitude" [1]. Moreover, this was considered as a sign of people's failure to adapt to city life. "Anomie" was the word used by Durkheim to

describe one's feeling of being alone although one is surrounded by many people. 'Anomie' was also used to explain why aggressive or criminal behaviour was likely to emerge in cities.

Human's adaptive capacities were equally influenced and altered by the continuous exposure to various stimuli and the increasing-size of cities. Louis Wirth (1938) and Max Weber discussed this idea, arguing that an increased number of inhabitants, exceeding the certain limits of a settlement, affect the relationships between them and the character of the city [2]. The city progressively became money-centred and in George Simmel's view, this was revealed by the lack of depth in urban life, and the reduced quality of urban objects, as quantity, value and productivity became more important.

Although economic aspects shaped cities and human behaviour after the Industrial Revolution, they were not completely deprived by their most romantic and pleasant features [3]. What people think about the city they live in is defined by how they interact with it, the quality of the information they collect through their senses. Besides the five basic senses, humans were gifted with imagination, creativity, and language. In the next chapter, further research has been made to discover how people's perception about the city can be influenced by texts, discourses, symbols and images, and how modernism and specialisation mitigated the concern for everyday life in the city, decreasing the role of public space.

III. THE LITERARY DIMENSION OF THE CITY

Throughout history, cities were imagined 'through antithetical notions of desire and disgust'[1]. The ambiguous distinction between simply pro-urban or anti-urban preferences justifies 'the true complexity of the social experience and representation of urban places'[1]. The role of literature, poetry, visual arts and humanist discourses was fundamental to spreading stories about great or dreadful urban settlements. But regardless of the plot of the stories, one thing is certain about cities: they are "polysemous" (they signify different things simultaneously) [1] and they offer a great variety of opportunities for people to challenge their true nature, as curious, creative and hedonistic living things.

Stories are powerful tools. They influence, control and bring about change. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that "whoever controls information about society is, to a greater or lesser extent, able to exert power in that reality" [1]. Therefore, well-written stories and beautiful images can create a more compelling portrait of a place than the personal experience. Pocock strongly supported the idea by arguing that "fictive reality may contain more truth than everyday reality" [1]. In this regard, literature is valuable because it offers detailed descriptions of buildings, places but also of social groups, placed in their distinctive context [1].

The France of the 19th century idolised a figure conceived by Charles Baudelaire and promoted in academia by Benjamin Walter: the flaneur [4]. Benjamin Walter inspired his ideas from Charles Baudelaire himself, describing him as "man of the street" that treated the streets as "his own personal realm"[1] and wandered about the city all day long in order to grasp the sounds, sights, and smell of the city, using them afterwards as inspiration for art and poetry. In Benjamin Walter's view, the flaneur used the modern city as a site for observation [1] and captured the more or less mundane events of everyday life. This way, images of the city and the multitude of sensations it induced were translated into words and feelings, and therefore, in new subjective visual representations that emphasised "the sense of place"[1].

Similar ideas concerning street life in cities after industrialisation arose from the work of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre's writing focuses on the influences of capitalism on cities, arguing that "capitalism has survived and flourished because it produces and occupies space"[1]. Moreover, he offers a conclusive example of how spatial abstractions "conceived the city as a coherent, homogenous whole which could be planned and organised to encourage capitalist development"[1]: urban maps. He feared that this model if spatial abstractions "over-coded"[1] the urban space and as a consequence, urban experiences were impoverished by the predominance of functional order.

Henri Lefebvre's writing is relevant for the analysis of public space in a way that it raised awareness of the lack of spaces dedicated to everyday life and not for consumption. This subject was of great concern to a group of journalists, architects and urban planners from the 20th century (Kevin Lynch, Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Christopher Alexander or Jan Gehl) that sought to demonstrate human behaviour and built environment profoundly influence each other.

IV. THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION OF THE CITY

As seen in the previous chapters, the world inside the human brain and the outside world are interrelated. Cognitive sciences suggest that the mind extends into the external environment and that people actually "live in two worlds at once, the ongoing visual experience being a dialogue between the two" [5] The interrelationship between body and mind was investigated by urban geographers, architects or researchers from related disciplinary domains.

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasma has become concerned about "the dominance of vision and the suppression of other senses and the consequent disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities from architecture" [6]. In his book, "The Eyes of the Skin", Pallasmaa emphasises the significance of tactile sense as being more important for humans as they experience and seek to understand the world. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu confirms this idea based on medical evidence: "The skin is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector. [...] Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin. [...] Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose and mouth. It is the sense which became differentiated into the others, a fact that seems to be recognised in the age-old evaluation of touch as "the mother of the senses" [6]. Hence, all the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile senses.

While different psychological and theoretical studies separated the body from the mind, the "body being perceived as an instrument of the mind" [1], David Seamon developed in the 1990's a phenomenology of everyday life, rejecting the abstract theorisation and categorisation, defining an experiential framework that saw movement, resting and encounter as the primary processes that helped the body collect information about the surroundings. Similar to Pallasmaa's views, David Seamon considers that the body has its way of "thinking" that enables it to perceive the physical space without consciously involving the mind.

The quality of kinaesthetic experiences of the urban space is influenced by a city's morphology and its landscape: buildings, streets, vegetation, squares et cetera. In the 1960s, the interaction between formal characteristics of public space and human behaviour was pinpointed as a field to be studied more carefully [3]. Kevin Lynch and Christopher Alexander turned their attention to the form of the city and its structural components.

Kevin Lynch focused more on space and less on the public life, but his work was decisive for the way public space is analysed in the present [3]. He developed a framework based on the image of the city, reducing its complexity to five basic elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. The five urban elements were used to create mental/cognitive maps in order to suggest that people use and understand their surroundings in predictable ways [5]. Based on his on-site analyses, Lynch could also point out that these elements are not independently perceived and that they form logic and coherent sequences [7].

As mentioned in the previous chapters, cities are equally compounded by form and language (symbols). According to Christopher Alexander, cities are products of "a complex set of interacting rules that reside in people's heads and are responsible for the way the environment is structured" [5]. He also believed that urban dwellers knew more about the city than urban planners or architects did. In his book, "A pattern language" (1977), Alexander defined 253 qualities that should help anyone, not just architects or urban planners, to design their cities, at different scales.

Both Lynch and Alexander criticised the modernistic ideologies of urban planning. A countermovement against modernism in urbanism

began in the 1980's, but voices of activists, protesting against various development plans in the United States, could be already heard by the 1950s [3].

V. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE CITY

Industrialisation is defined by the need for specialisation, order and efficiency. In the field of urban development, responsibilities were divided, and many different experts controlled every aspect of the city. Their main purpose was to assure that the city was developing in a functional, healthy, and effective way [3].

More systematic planning became the response to population growth and the need to expand the city's limits [3]. Modernism in urban planning offered the proper tools for doing that: large-scale projects that looked functional viewed from above but lacked social cohesion at the street level. Modernism approaches were supposed to solve urban inhabitants' problems with transportation, housing, or jobs, but at the same time, they mitigated the concern for public space and public life [3]. Although the urbanisation plans developed in this period had good intentions, they were devoided of human-scale components, and modernism's specific language turned out to be very poor.

Journalist Jane Jacobs "criticised planning as being abstract and human distant" [8] and struggled to save American cities from the "ideals of modernism and traffic planners" [3]. In order to help people understand the importance of public life and space in their own lives, Jacobs used a holistic approach, emphasising the importance of economic, social and physical parameters for the quality and functionality of urban spaces. She believed that going out on the streets is the only way to learn about what works and what does not [3].

Having in mind all the ideas mentioned in the previous chapters, it can be stated that Jane Jacobs played the role of a "flaneur" and she did not let herself overwhelmed by "anomia", using her journalistic skills to write the story of cities created for people. Furthermore, she listened to people's problems, needs and desires, and tried hard to make cities adapt to its inhabitants and not otherwise.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The human mind is complex, and so are the things it creates. Cities are one of the most complex and antagonistic inventions of humans. On the one hand, they help people evolve and progress, but on the other hand, they make them feel insecure and incapable of adapting to the multitude of stimuli.

Although human settlements have been exhaustively documented, their fast-changing nature made the development of an optimal urban framework an impossible assignment.

An important thing to keep in mind is that cities are made for humans, and thus it must protect its inhabitants and create opportunities for them to thrive. The increasing-size of urban settlements and the unforeseeable character of everyday life have major impacts on people's health and well-being. Simultaneously, urban dwellers' movements construct the urban environment, and therefore their behaviour has the power to shape its image and the quality of it. Modern urbanism's approach to planning cities from above may have a positive influence on the way built environment is comprehended, but in order for people to enjoy urban experiences, an approach based on their immediate daily needs is nowadays more suitable. The reason is that with every step they make and with every glance they take, humans transform cities and in their turn, cities mirror the social reality.

Simplifying the processes through which human settlements are analysed or dissected, as Kevin Lynch or Christopher Alexander did, does not mean that our anthropogenic environments lack complexity. On the contrary, it indicates that this is an efficient way to get people (regardless of their educational background) understand the world they live in and encourage them to act in order to improve it.

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